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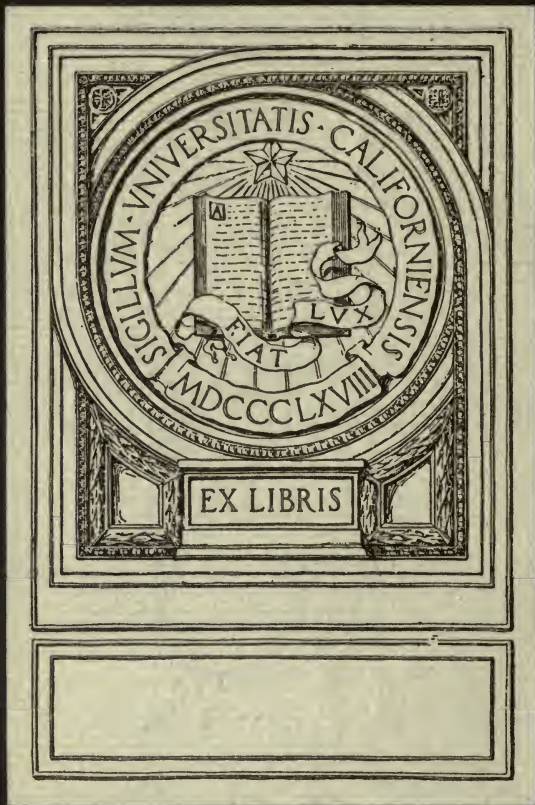
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SOME GREEK AND ROMAN IDEAS  
OF A FUTURE LIFE

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## SOME GREEK AND ROMAN IDEAS OF A FUTURE LIFE

*(A Lecture read to the Leeds Branch of the Classical  
Association on January 23rd, 1915.)*

I remember being greatly struck a few years ago by the remark of the vicar of a large suburban parish on the outskirts of a big Midland town. "I have no doubt," he said, "that the real religion of these people centres not in the Church but in the churchyard." But when I asked him what they believed about the continued existence of their dead kin, he replied that it was impossible to say: "Their beliefs are very various and very vague, but the reality of the existence of their friends is most vivid to them here in the churchyard." There was no doubt some exaggeration in his verdict—and certainly a note of pessimism—but I could not help feeling myself transported across the centuries to the old world of Greece and Rome, and thinking for the moment how little the mind of man has changed. There, too, we have as what might be called the "established" religion a noble conception of personal powers or deities controlling the destinies of the world and tending towards an idealized monotheism not so far distant in some respects from our own conception of God—and under it all in the mind of the common people, as recent investigators have shown, perhaps again with some exaggeration, a persistent clinging to chthonic notions and chthonic rites, associated closely with a belief in the continued existence of the dead. And there, too, such belief is vague and various: we have the philosophical speculations of Plato, arguing on a logical basis for the continuity of the activities of the soul, the mystic visions of the Orphics or the neo-Platonists of the surroundings and doings of the dead, and at the other extreme the crude popular notions of the imprisonment of the dead spirits in their tombs and their impish propensities when they

are let loose, as we see them in the underlying ideas for instance of the Anthesteria at Athens and the Lemuria at Rome.

It is clear that this is a vast and important field of inquiry, and I do not intend, even if I had the capacity, to make any attempt to cover it. I shall have little to say of philosophical argument and not much of mystic speculation, for I want to get back, so to speak, to "the common people in the church-yard," and to trace on a few definite lines their conceptions of the nature of the existence of the dead and its relation to their own lives. We shall not find here the highest notions—or perhaps the truest—but although I should always be ready to maintain that a nation's most valuable contribution to the thought of the world lies in the greatest ideas of its best writers, and not in the vague and often conventional notions of the popular mind, yet these too have a special value of their own and in particular, as I have already hinted, give us a practical clue to the continuity of the workings of the human mind in different ages.

But if this inquiry has a peculiar interest, it is obvious that it has also a very special difficulty: for, if it is so hard to probe the mind even of our own contemporaries on such a subject, how can we hope to discover anything of the mind of the common people in antiquity? The discussion of method is nearly always tiresome, but a few words now will absolve us from constant explanation as we proceed. There are, I suppose, three main sources from which we may draw information: first, custom and ritual, with which we may include the evidence afforded us by archaeology as to the character of burial-places and their contents; secondly, epitaphs, of which a great profusion has been preserved to us, both on monuments and in literature; and thirdly, the evidence of literature itself. But with regard to the use of all these three certain cautions are necessary. Ritual will tell us no doubt what at any given time people did, but it will not necessarily tell us what they thought; for ritual is of all things conservative, and stereotyped practices are kept up long after they have lost their meaning. If then we wish to use ritual rightly we must try to get back to the ideas lying behind the acts and

remember that those will often be the ideas of a preceding age. Almost the same is true of epitaphs. Though here and there—especially perhaps in the poetic epitaphs of the *Anthology*—we may come across a genuine outburst of personal feeling, the vast majority of them will be conventional, representing no particular belief on the part of those who created them, but rather the proper thing to say. Yet here again we may work back to a genuine widespread belief, not necessarily contemporary. Literature is of course the most fertile source of our information, and partly for this reason, partly because of the difficulty of trusting the other two, Professor Hardie, in a brilliant lecture on this subject<sup>1</sup>, illustrated with his great range of learning, is inclined to regard it as our safest guide. But I cannot help thinking that there is a double danger in the use of literature for this purpose: for not only does the element of conventionality still very largely persist, but when a writer breaks away from it there is the new danger of the intrusion of his own personality, thoughts and speculations. No one, for instance, would take the dialogues of Plato as an infallible index to popular contemporary ideas, but we must not be too ready to find them in Aeschylus or even in Sophocles: the personal equation must as far as possible be discounted, and we must look not so much to the expression of individual ideas and thoughts as to the presuppositions on which they are based. In a word, then, we may recognize our sources of information, but we must be prepared to sift and analyze them with judgment.

I have said that I wish to pursue a few definite lines of thought in the ancient world with regard to the state of the dead. Let me now try to define my scope more closely. I suppose that any student of classical literature will in the course of his reading have noticed, even though he was not struck by their difference or inconsistency, three main conceptions. Let us suppose, in the first place, that he is reading the *Choephoroe* of Aeschylus and trying to form a picture of the supposed condition of the dead Agamemnon. It is clear to begin with that his spirit has a definite local habitation, his tomb or the

<sup>1</sup> *Lectures on Classical Subjects*, pp. 36 ff.



earth just beneath it: there offerings are brought by those who love him, there he can hear their voices, and there his presence is felt by them in a very special way. True the ghost of the mangled and unburied Clytemnestra<sup>1</sup> can appear to the Erinyes, who are at the moment the avenging ministers of her death, in the temple at Delphi, but the duly buried Agamemnon inhabits his tomb. His presence is not thought of as corporeal but rather as that of a spirit: his life is quickened by the offerings of his children and by the gift of their own hair, which is, as it were, a communication of some part of their own vitality, and he can feel the insults which Aegisthus heaps on the actual tomb above him<sup>2</sup>. He is thus dependent on the living, and in return he can not merely feel love or hate for them, but can in some mysterious way give them help and power. In short, it is a confined existence, limited to a particular spot, and thought of in general as the existence of a spirit or ghost. If we pass now to Homer, although, as we shall see, traces of the same conception are not wholly absent, yet for the most part we have a very different notion of the after-life: no longer does the spirit inhabit the dead man's grave, but at the moment of death it leaves the body and flies "twittering<sup>3</sup>" to an unearthly place, "the house of Hades," where are gathered together all the spirits of the dead. Here the "strengthless heads" of the departed lead a shadowy existence, feeble, inert, without the mind or the will or the power which they had on earth—a life so colourless that it would be better "to be a serf upon the face of the earth rather than to rule over all the dead<sup>4</sup>." This shadowy land is, as we learn when Odysseus voyages to it, somewhere in the far west<sup>5</sup>, in a murky gloomy country where no ray of the sun, no earthly joy seems to penetrate: Teiresias<sup>6</sup> alone, who in his earthly life had converse with things unseen, retains in the lower world his "wise knowledge" or, as we might almost say in modern terms, his "consciousness." Now in this new idea, besides its general conception, there are two points of interest: in the first place, although the soul at

<sup>1</sup> Aesch. *Eum.* 94.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Eur. *El.* 326.

<sup>3</sup> *Od.* xxiv. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Od.* xi. 489.

<sup>5</sup> *Od.* xi. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Od.* x. 494.



death definitely leaves the body, yet the dead are thought of as much more corporeal in appearance and nature than in the other conception where body and spirit are buried together beneath the tomb; in the second, there is now no communication between the dead and the living world except through strange visitations such as that of Odysseus: the dead can have no further part or interest in the world above, nor can they help or harm the living. Lastly, for our third picture we may turn most simply to Virgil and there, among many elements derived alike from religion and philosophy, and fused with his own unequalled skill and feeling, we find a new conception, foreshadowed indeed in one part<sup>1</sup> of Homer's own *Néκνια*—I mean of course the idea of punishment and reward in the lower world. When, guided by the Sibyl, Aeneas has passed through the limbo of the infants and seen the shades of those who have but newly come to the world below<sup>2</sup>, he reaches a parting of the ways. At first he takes the left-hand path and hears the wailing and lamentation of the sinners in torment condemned by the judgment of Rhadamanthus—not only, as in Homer, the heroic sinners of the old world, but ordinary mortals who in life have committed great crimes. And then coming on to the *amoena virecta* of the groves of the blessed<sup>3</sup>, he finds once more with the great heroes of the past the holy priests and those who “found out” arts and those who died of wounds in the service of their country. In both places personality is no longer shadowy but distinct, feelings both of pleasure and pain are acute, and the great vision<sup>4</sup> of the unborn waiting to take their turn to cross the ferry gives the clear link between the upper and lower worlds.

It is these three conceptions, that of the spirit in the tomb, the shade in Hades, and the dead personality punished or rewarded, which I wish to examine with some care and to offer some suggestions as to their origin, relation and development. The contrast between the first two notions—that of the spirit confined to the tomb or its immediate neighbourhood, yet dependent on the living and capable of helping and harming them, and that of the independent personality dwelling with

<sup>1</sup> *Od.* xl. 568.

<sup>2</sup> *Aen.* vi. 540.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 637.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 703.

other shades in the far-off land—is so marked that at first sight it seems almost strange that they should be found side by side among the same people. At least the phenomenon demands explanation. It has been suggested<sup>1</sup> that the two notions must be referred to the two modes of burial practised among the early peoples of Europe, interment and cremation. When the body of the dead man is buried intact in the tomb and the great mound of earth is raised above it to mark the spot (*σῆμα*), it is natural to think of him as still present there where his body was laid. And if his existence is in any way to be prolonged, it must be by the constant offering of food and drink placed by his kindred and friends on the tomb, or even communicated more directly to him by means of a channel running downwards from the base of the mound into the interior chamber where the body lies. But where cremation is practised, the whole idea is at once changed: the body is now consumed and ceases to exist, and the spirit, set free by this process—or, as is apparently the Homeric conception, leaving the body at the moment of death—is at liberty to pass away to a new country, where the spirits of all the dead are gathered. Now if we try to apply this explanation to early Greece, we are able to draw an interesting corollary. For in the earliest period which archaeology has revealed to us—that of the shaft tombs of Mycenae—interment is universal; the dead are interred surrounded by their weapons and all the wealth which was dear to them in life: the conception is clearly that of a continued existence on the spot. But when we pass to the later bee-hive tombs, we find no relics of interment, but on the contrary in one instance at least apparent traces of combustion. The most recent archaeological authorities are very doubtful as to the security of this latter inference, but be this as it may, the general idea of the priority of interment in Greece obtains striking confirmation when we turn to literature. There can be no doubt in the Homeric poems that the prevailing custom is cremation, as we have it elaborately described, for instance, in the funeral of Patroclus, and the

<sup>1</sup> Ridgeway, *Early Age of Greece*, Chap. vii.; cf. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age*, p. 398; Thomson, *Studies in the Odyssey*, p. 25.

prevailing belief as to the fate of the dead is that of their departure to the shadow-land, where Odysseus meets them in the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*. Yet here and there in the poem are embedded phrases and ideas which point to interment. More than once do we hear—sometimes in a cremation-context which makes the allusion meaningless—of the “embalmmment” (ταρχύειν)<sup>1</sup> of the body, and the raising of the barrow to mark the spot (σῆμα) and the performance of the due rites upon it, κτέρεα κτερείζειν<sup>2</sup>, a vague phrase probably indicating offerings of meat and drink to strengthen the dead. More significant still is the scene<sup>3</sup> where Odysseus on the borders of the land of Hades, digs the trench (βόθρος), and pours into it the libations of wine and mead and water and sprinkles the barley-offering. Finally he sacrifices the victims and lets their blood run into it, and it is only when they have drunk the blood of the sheep that the “strengthless heads” gain life enough to come before Odysseus in visible shape and speak to him. All this scene, set as it is in the very forefront of the vision of the world of Hades, yet belongs essentially to the other conception of the spirit in the tomb<sup>4</sup>. Now if we may regard Homer as a “traditional book”—and I would like to make ample apologies at once if I am offending any one’s susceptibilities in doing so—we know what this inconsistency means. Just as, to take a simple illustration, the Achaean warrior in the *Iliad* normally has a breast-plate and a round shield, yet here and there we find him fighting with the great figure-of-eight shield and no body-armour, as the Mycenaean warriors are represented on the “dagger-blade” and elsewhere, so here: cremation is the normal process of burial for Homer, but the older custom peeps out occasionally in the stereotyped phraseology and ideas which have come down from an earlier age in which epic poetry was growing. We may say then with some confidence that the conception

<sup>1</sup> *Il.* vii. 85; xvi. 456, 674.

<sup>2</sup> *Od.* i. 291.

<sup>3</sup> *Od.* xi. 24 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars are inclined to regard the appearance of Patroclus’ ghost to Achilles (*Il.* xxiii. 65) as further evidence in the same direction. But as that appearance takes place before the cremation, I do not think it is inconsistent with the general cremation notion, though it is slightly at variance with Homer’s usual belief that the spirit flies to Hades at the moment of death.



of the spirit in the tomb is associated with interment, is the earlier notion in Greece, is Mycenaean: that of the land of Hades is associated with cremation, is later, is Achaean.

But is this by itself a fully satisfactory explanation? In spite of its apparent sufficiency in the eyes of recent writers, I confess to feeling one serious difficulty about it, which makes me desire to pursue the problem a little further. For it is surely a strange paradox that interment, in which the essential feature is the preservation—at any rate temporarily—of the body intact, should produce a conception of the existence of the dead and their influence on the living which is mainly that of a vague spirit, whereas cremation, which does away with the body, should lead to the idea of an underworld in which the dead move and act in the corporeal manner of living beings and may even become visible in corporeal form. Some further explanation is clearly required. Now I am inclined to believe that those who have investigated beliefs as to the condition of the dead and their cults have very frequently gone astray in divorcing this particular problem from the wider questions of religious belief and treating it as in some way a thing apart. Certainly in this instance I think the clue to our difficulty is to be found in the general difference of religious conceptions in the periods which we call Mycenaean and Achaean. The more we learn of the Mycenaean or Minoan or Aegean religion, the more do we seem to find it chthonic and animistic: the centre of worship is undoubtedly the great earth-goddess conceived of as residing in the earth on which we live and move and have our being, and although there are certainly anthropomorphic representations of her to be found, yet from the association of symbols with her worship and the indications of other survivals, it seems that she was regarded rather as a spirit than a person, as a *numen*, to use Latin phraseology, rather than a *dea*. The Achaean religion on the other hand, as we find it triumphant in Homer, is essentially anthropomorphic and Olympian: as the deities themselves are anthropomorphic, so they leave earth and mount into the sky—they are more distinct personalities and they inhabit a wider world. Does not this analogy give us



the hint we require? The older Mycenaean conception of the existence of the dead, in spite of its association with corporeal interment and the natural chthonic idea of the presence of the dead in the earth, yet thinks of the dead as spirits, because it dates from an animistic period, which produced for instance among the Romans the analogous conception of the *genius* of the living: the later Achaean conception, although it is connected with cremation, which destroys the body, yet, because it dates from an anthropomorphic period, conceives the dead in bodily form and places them in a shadow-land, itself as remote from the world in which they once lived as is the Olympian home of the gods. And if we want a confirmation of this theory we may look at the beliefs of the early Romans. Among them it appears that both interment and cremation were practised indifferently: yet because the whole conception of the genuine Roman religion was essentially and always animistic, so before the period of Greek influence, we have in Rome only the notion of the dead as spirits confined to the tomb and its neighbourhood or to the home in which they lived their lives. I do not of course want to enunciate any wild general proposition that interment goes always with animism and cremation with anthropomorphism: but I should like to suggest that the peculiar character of Greek beliefs was due to these divergent associations in the first two epochs of which we have any cognizance. In the Mycenaean age, when interment was practised and religion was animistic, we get the conception of the spirit in the tomb; in the Achaean period, when cremation was practised and religion was anthropomorphic, we get the idea of the anthropomorphic shade in the far-off shadow-land.

Towards the end<sup>1</sup> of the Homeric *Néκвия* there comes an abrupt change in the narrative and the setting of the scene. Hitherto Odysseus is at the trench and the shades come up one by one from their gloomy abode, drink the blood, converse and depart. But after the ghost of Ajax has left his former rival in sullen silence, ideas and phraseology suddenly become different. No longer do the shades advance towards Odysseus,

<sup>1</sup> *Od.* XI. 568.

but he is apparently himself in the heart of the underworld and he "beholds" (*εἰσενόησα*) a series of pictures. First there is Minos sitting in judgment on the souls who plead their cause before his throne. Then there is Orion pursuing in an asphodel meadow the beasts he hunted upon earth; then the three great sinners of old time, Tityos, Tantalus and Sisyphus, suffering each the appropriate penalty for their wrong-doing in life; and finally that strange scene—unparalleled in its thought, as far as I know—in which the "ghost" (*εἶδωλον*) of Heracles is seen alert and ready for fresh fights such as he endured on earth, while he himself, we are told, in reward for his struggles, "is among the immortal gods, rejoicing in festival and having to wife Hebe of the fair ankles." The break in language is itself enough to show that we are in the presence of a different stratum of thought, but let us think of it in connexion with the normal Homeric picture of the underworld. The listless inactivity which so appals and depresses the shade of Achilles has given place to an almost vital energy: the conflicts of the upper world are renewed and its pains and joys may be experienced again. But more than that: the next life is brought at once into a moral relation with the life on earth. According as men's deeds have been, so will be their fate. Greed shall continue greedy, but suffer everlasting frustration; lust shall be met with eternal physical suffering; ambition shall be set to an unending uphill task pursued for ever in vain. And in the case of Heracles comes the hint that noble struggle and suffering on earth may exalt a man even to the gods. I spoke loosely of the conception of reward and punishment as a third notion of the future life; it is clear now that it would be more rightly regarded as a development of the second. The colourless idea of the underworld almost without content is vitalized and given meaning by the included notion of morality: how does this come about? It is not here quite so easy to give a confident answer, but I believe that once again the analogy of wider religious conceptions may help us. When anthropomorphism first springs from animism the divine beings are conceived with brutal realism as "men of like passions with ourselves":

they have just the same lusts and desires as we have, but infinitely greater scope for their satisfaction. But this crude and primitive translation of the human into terms of the divine seems very soon to undergo modification: man reflects, and reflection seems to bring to him almost at once a sense that he must find in religion a sanction for his own moral code, and if so, his conception of the divine must itself be moralized. Already even in Homer, if we may believe Professor Murray, this process of moral "bowdlerization" has been at work<sup>1</sup>, although enough survives and to spare of the primitive non-morality of the gods. The principle is explicit in Pindar, who criticizes and reforms the ancient legends on moral grounds<sup>2</sup>. "For me it cannot be," he says, in speaking of the banquet of Tantalus, "that I should call one of the blessed ones a cannibal (*γαστρίμαργον*)." Similarly among the philosophers we find Xenophanes, and later on Plato, ready to restate or even to abandon anthropomorphism itself on account of its immoralities. I conceive that a parallel process took place with regard to the beliefs of the after-life. The old conception did not indeed need purification, for it was too indefinite to admit of reformation, but as morality becomes more distinct and more a matter of reason in life, the notion of the underworld must be brought into relation with it. We may conceive, if we will—and the idea is not without warrant<sup>3</sup>—that the earliest presentation of moral justice held—as we get it prominently in the Psalms—that the good man prospers and the bad man suffers on this earth. And when further reflection showed that this was not so in fact, popular belief—grappling with the same problem that vexed Aeschylus, but finding a different solution—transferred reward and punishment to the after-life. Be this as it may, morality has now enriched with a vital content a very pallid and unsatisfying picture.

In the Homeric poems then—which we have learnt no longer to think of as the cradle of Greek thought, but may

<sup>1</sup> It may be seen best perhaps in the growing conception of Zeus as the ultimate power of justice.

<sup>2</sup> *Ol.* i. 53.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Plato, *Rep.* ii.



perhaps still call its nursery—we find traces and germs of all the three notions of future existence of the dead which we have taken as typical of the ancient world. I want now, as briefly as I can, to try and trace their history in later Greek thought and see what was their ultimate fate.

It was not unintentionally that I took my first picture of the spirit in the tomb from Aeschylus, for a moment's reflection will show us that it is the chthonic conception of the existence of the dead which runs through all tragedy. Indeed so largely does it bulk that Professor Ridgeway has lately been led to believe<sup>1</sup> that the cult of the hero's tomb is in fact the very foundation on which tragedy is built. I need not multiply instances or remind you how the *Oedipus Coloneus* centres round the tomb of Oedipus at Colonus, the *Ajax* round the transference of his relics to Attica, the *Hecuba*, round the tomb of Achilles at Sigeum, and so forth; the idea is familiar to us all. But there are two points which are of importance for our present purpose. In the first place we have seen that the notion of the spirit in the tomb is chthonic and belongs to the oldest stratum of thought in Greece; but the whole setting of tragedy is Olympian and anthropomorphic. It might be expected that this anomaly would lead both to conflict and inconsistency, and in fact it does. One of the many aspects of the struggle between the old and the new ideas with which Aeschylus is wrestling throughout the *Oresteia* is just the opposition between the old chthonic notions of the dead and their appeal for vengeance as such through the instrumentality of the Erinyes—blind, unreasoning powers of retaliation—and the new conception of justice and even of mercy associated with the Olympian Zeus; and it is part of the poet's supreme achievement that in the transformation of the Erinyes to the Semnai Theai, and its counterpart in the acquittal of the crime-stained yet not guilty Orestes, backed as it is by the noble picture of the spirit of Agamemnon asking only for love and justice in contrast with the ghost of Clytemnestra shrieking for unreasoning revenge, he has effected the reconciliation of the two rival creeds. Henceforth

<sup>1</sup> *The Origin of Tragedy.*



in tragedy there is no more conflict but only occasional inconsistency, as for instance in the *Electra*<sup>1</sup> of Sophocles where the *χθονία φάμα*, the voice speaking at the tomb to the buried dead, is apparently thought of as reaching the Atreidae dwelling in a land of shades, or in the *Choephoroe*<sup>2</sup> itself, where in close connexion with his father in the tomb Orestes appeals to *Ἑρμῆς χθόνιοις*, the *ψυχοπομπός* of the Olympian conception of Hades, or in the *Hecuba*<sup>3</sup> where the ghost of Polydorus arrives in the prologue *λιπῶν κευθμῶνα καὶ σκότου πύλας*, whereas the spirit of Achilles later on is beneath his tomb and has offerings presented to him directly. Yet though tragedy has reached this sort of tacit adjustment, may it not be that the very incongruity of the chthonic conception of the dead in an otherwise Olympian setting has given it a fictitious prominence which has led modern critics to assign to it an undue significance?

The second point is of more immediate import for us. The whole conception of the spirit in the tomb and his cult by the living, as it is exhibited in tragedy, centres round the figures of the great heroes of legend, and the further we try to trace it back beyond tragedy by means of ritual and monuments, the more clearly is it seen to represent the cult of divine or semi-divine beings rather than the normal relation between the living and their dead. Here then comes in our caution about literary evidence: we are bound to ask whether on other grounds we are justified in supposing that the picture we get from tragedy represents anything like the common attitude which the ordinary Greek of a classical or pre-classical period would have held towards his own dead parents or ancestors. Now it must be confessed that the evidence of Greek ritual and custom is on this point very slight. An attempt has recently been made by Miss Harrison<sup>4</sup> to show that underlying the superficial wine-festival of the Anthesteria was a much older chthonic ritual in which the *κῆρες*, the spirits of the dead regarded as impish and mischievous, are let loose upon the earth at the Pithoigia of the first day, receive libations (*χόες* = *χοαί*) on the second day, and on the third are bottled

<sup>1</sup> 1066.

<sup>2</sup> Aesch. *Choe.* I.

<sup>3</sup> Eur. *Hec.* I.

<sup>4</sup> *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, pp. 32 ff.

up and dismissed again to earth with the famous formula *θύραζε κήρες, οὐκέτ' Ἀνθεστήρια*. I do not propose to tackle this thorny problem beyond saying that, although I am not prepared to accept Miss Harrison's case in full, I do think there is evidence for some such associated notions. Yet even if here we have a trace of a very crude form of the chthonic belief, in which the dead are regarded as hostile forces to be averted and controlled, it would nevertheless remain almost unsupported, and there seems to be nothing which can recall the quieter and nobler conception of the relation of dead and living which is suggested by the tragic picture of Agamemnon and his children. Are we to say then that such a notion is in ordinary life foreign to the ancient world? Undoubtedly not, for in the genuine Roman religion, which always clung tenaciously to the animistic view, we have the idea developed with great fullness and significance in several aspects. There are in the Roman Calendar two festivals<sup>1</sup> of the dead standing in marked contrast and representing clearly enough two possible aspects of the relation of dead and living. In the Lemuria<sup>2</sup> in the early days of May we have an apotropaic ceremony, not unlike what Miss Harrison finds in the Anthesteria. Ovid<sup>3</sup> has preserved for us the domestic rites: the father of the household must rise at midnight and pass from room to room with black beans in his mouth. These he must spit out without turning round to look, saying, as he does so, "With these I redeem me and mine." Washing ceremonially and beating brazen vessels, he must repeat the performance nine times and then in words which closely recall the apotropaic formula of the Anthesteria, he exclaims, "Ghosts of our fathers, begone" (*manes exite paterni*)<sup>4</sup>. Here the dead are regarded as liable to return to their old haunts and as naturally harmful or at least mischievous in their attitude to their descendants. Nor is it, I

<sup>1</sup> See W. Warde Fowler, *Religious Experiences of the Roman People*, pp. 393-5.

<sup>2</sup> See W. Warde Fowler, *Roman Festivals*, pp. 106-10.

<sup>3</sup> *Fasti*, v. 421 ff.

<sup>4</sup> There is a difficulty in the use of the dignified and kindly title *manes* in this formula instead of the more impish *lemures* or *larvae*, which would suit with the natural conception of the Lemuria, but it is probably a case of euphemism.

think, necessary to suppose, as Mr Warde Fowler does, that the Lemures represent the spirits of the *unburied* dead. To the primitive tiller of the soil with animistic beliefs the powers that are in the earth are always potentially hostile and may wreck the produce of the ground, and the farther we can go back in Roman religion, the more do we find the natural attitude towards the spirits one of fear and a consciousness of the necessity of placation. The days of the Parentalia<sup>1</sup> in February, which significantly enough do not appear in the oldest Calendar and were regarded even by Roman scholars as of later origin than the Lemuria, show us a very different picture. On these days, apparently, the whole people went, as did individual families on the anniversaries of deaths, to the family tombs; the rites of burial were symbolically renewed, offerings of water, wine, milk, honey and oil were made, and black victims were sacrificed (*parentare*), the solemn greeting *salve et vale* was repeated, and petitions were made—though probably not before a comparatively late date—for the aid of the dead to their living kinsmen. Finally, on the last day of the festival families united in the *Caristia*, a kind of love-feast, in which the dead were supposed to have their share. It is a singularly beautiful and peaceful picture, and we must unite with it the notion of the daily presence of the holy dead at the family meal: offerings of part of the family food are thrown into the hearth for them, and the little statuettes of the Lares—who came to represent the dead—were placed upon the table. It is a consecration of family life and the acknowledgment of the continued presence of the dead in the old home and their share in the fortunes of the family. Rome certainly gives us the high-water mark of the possible development of the chthonic notion of the spirit in the tomb.

In Greece then as applied to ordinary mortals the chthonic conception of survival seems to be singularly barren, and though in Rome it leads in religious practice to a very beautiful symbolism, we shall find cause, when we come to examine the epitaphs, to doubt whether it had much real hold or significance. Let us pass to consider the conception of Hades.

<sup>1</sup> See Warde Fowler, *Roman Festivals*, pp. 306–10.



Here in strong contrast we find constant development and an ever-growing significance both for the educated and thoughtful and for the common people. We have seen how even as early as Homer the idea of Hades has begun to be moulded by reflection, and in particular by an association with a moral conception of life on earth. It is just this adaptability to the influence of thought which gives it its vitality and the capacity for expansion. After Homer we meet it first in Pindar, and in the famous passage of the second *Olympian*<sup>1</sup> we find that to the inherited idea of the underworld and the notion of punishment and reward two new conceptions have been added: firstly, the vision of a blessed life—not the solitary privilege of Heracles who through suffering attained to heaven, but accessible to all who have lived nobly on earth—and secondly, the notion of a kind of purgatorial process in a series of lives “here and there” by which lesser men can win the same reward. “Of those who are dead the hearts that are stubborn pay the penalty again in this world, and the sins committed in this realm of Zeus are judged beneath the earth by one who pronounces verdict by a stern law. But the good, having the light of the sun for ever alike by night and by day, are given a life that knows no toil: they trouble not the ground by skill of hand, no, nor the waters of the deep in their sojourning there; but among the honoured of the gods, all those who took pleasure in faith to their oaths lead a life that knows no tears. But the others bear toil whereon none can look. And all who have had heart to abide thrice on this side and on that and to keep their souls altogether from wickedness, traverse the road of Zeus to the tower of Cronos; there the ocean-born breezes fan the islands of the blest, and flowers of gold blaze forth, some springing on land from goodly trees, while others the water nourishes, and with garlands thereof they wreath their arms and foreheads.” Here are the germs of much in later Greek life and thought. We might trace it, of course, in philosophy, and see how the notion of the successive

<sup>1</sup> *Ol.* II. 63 ff. The whole conception here is undoubtedly Orphic, but the passage is also probably the fullest development in Greek literature of the moral conception of the lower world.



lives "here and there" becomes the basis of the Pythagorean metempsychosis, and thence the ground in Plato both of his intellectual doctrine of *ἀνάμνησις* in the *Meno*, and of his more imaginative epitome of the meaning of life in the Myth of Er at the conclusion of the *Republic*. We might take the notion of gradual purification and see how that again gave Plato the conception of purgatory and the Stoics their idea of the ultimate refining of the *aurai simplicis ignis*. Or we could see more simply how the primitive belief in the separation of soul from body leads directly to the most complete of all ancient arguments for immortality in the *Phaedo*. There can be no doubt of the potent influence of the picture of Hades, with all its developments and modifications, on the educated thought of the ancient world. But for the moment this is beside our purpose, and we wish rather to look to the effect on popular thought. The idea of a judgment after death on the deeds of this life leading to punishment for the wicked and happiness for the good—it is astonishing how in all ages it is believed to be so easy to mark any man as definitely one or the other—becomes firmly rooted in the popular mind, and is stereotyped after the usual Greek habit in the legend of Aecus, Minos, and Rhadamanthus. It is characteristic too of the optimism of the Greek mind that imagination does not dwell—like that of mediaeval poets and painters—on the horrors of punishment, but rather on the joys and beauties of the land of the blessed. It is the picture of Elysium, not that of Tartarus, which is elaborated, and, in common speech, departed friends are spoken of in typical euphemism as "the blessed," *ὁ μακάριος* and *ἡ μακαρίτις*.

But of course the most emphatic demonstration of this view of future existence lay in the Mysteries. Though they are still to some extent a sealed book to us, we know enough about them now to realize that the strong grip which they held on the popular imagination at a time when the traditional religion had become to some extent stereotyped and unreal, lay in their promise and revelation of a future life. The Mysteries of Eleusis had, it would seem, the dignity and something of the formalism of a state-cult. The solemn procession

to Eleusis, the feeling of awe which surrounded the ceremonies of initiation and the performance of the rites produced a certain aloofness and even coldness in their effect on the popular mind. Much too of their ceremonial, connected as it was with the chthonic corn-deities, undoubtedly bore reference to the annual fertility of the earth. But we know that the central interest of the ceremonies at Eleusis was some kind of pantomimic representation of the underworld<sup>1</sup>, and we have only to go to the great chorus<sup>2</sup> of the *Mystae* in the *Frogs* to get a comprehension of the ecstatic joy of the Initiated. Orphism was a more popular form of the mystery-notion—more popular and more individual. There was, as far as we can gather, less common worship and ceremonial: to each initiate was revealed the vision of the future life, and he was given for himself mystic directions for his conduct in the journey to the lower world and mystic formulae to help him on his way. We may take one example—the curious tablet found at Petelia in South Italy and now in the British Museum. I quote Professor Murray's translation<sup>3</sup>: "Thou shalt find to the left of the House of Hades a well-spring, and by the side thereof standing a white cypress. To this well-spring approach not near. But thou shalt find another by the Lake of Memory, cold water flowing forth, and there are Guardians before it. Say: 'I am a child of Earth and of Starry Heaven; but my race is of heaven (alone). This ye know yourselves. And lo, I am parched with thirst and I perish. Give me quickly the cold water flowing forth from the Lake of Memory.' And of themselves they will give thee to drink of the holy well-spring, and thereafter among the other Heroes thou shalt have lordship." Of course this idea of initiation may suffer abuse: imagination and mere fancy may be exalted into a matter of faith and postulated as certainty. The degradation of practice too is emphatically put before us by Plato<sup>4</sup> in his picture of the wandering *μάντεις* and *ἀγύρται* who go about selling initiation and, we may almost say, absolution, and promising

<sup>1</sup> See L. R. Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, vol. III. pp. 179 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Aristoph. *Batr.* 324.

<sup>3</sup> J. E. Harrison, *Prolegomena*, Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Rep.* II. 364 B.

their customers the reward of an "eternal carouse" (*μέθη αἰώνιος*). But this is not characteristic of the true Orphism, for it demanded from its adherents not merely a ceremonial purity, but a moral purity of life. "Out of the pure I come, O queen of the Pure" is the constantly repeated formula of the tablets, and though we know that in effect this purity was apt to express itself in the quaint mixture of genuine asceticism and conventional taboos which we know as "Pythagoreanism," yet it is clear that there underlies them the notion of a simple and guiltless life. Once again in this later development there is the connexion of religion and morality which marked the vision of the future life right back in the *Odyssey*.

To Rome, where, as we have seen, the chthonic idea had been developed at its best, this other conception of a future life came as a wholly foreign importation. Yet with that strange avidity of assimilation which characterized her religious life, when she came into contact with other nations, she took eagerly to the new conceptions, and we can find nowhere in Greek literature a stranger picture of the lengths to which the initiation-ideas may run than in the curious jumble of mysteries with neo-Platonism and Egyptian religion and crude magic which forms the conclusion<sup>1</sup> of the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius. But Rome in her greatest periods was sane and severe, and if we ask for the full development of the idea of the other world in antiquity, as we started from Homer, so we must come back to Virgil. Critics may dissect the Sixth Aeneid and discover in it superficial inconsistencies, but it remains the epitome of the ancient vision of the after-world. All the threads are united there: the pictures of popular legend, the speculations of philosophy, the visions of the mysteries, the imagery of the poets, all welded together in a new and higher moral grasp, which correlates the life on earth and the hereafter in a reasonable yet essentially religious comprehension. Of late Mr Glover<sup>2</sup> and Professor Conway<sup>3</sup> have done much to

<sup>1</sup> Bk. xi.

<sup>2</sup> *Studies in Virgil*, chap. x.

<sup>3</sup> "The Structure of Aeneid VI," in *Essays and Studies presented to W. Ridgeway*; see also E. Norden, "Vergilstudien," *Hermes*, 1893.



help us to understand it in detail and as a whole, and if we wish to feel as antiquity did at its best, and to know why it was Virgil who led Christian Dante through the lower world, we must go back and study the Sixth Aeneid again and again.

To learn the ultimate outcome in popular sentiment of ideas as to the survival of the dead we should naturally turn to the tombs themselves and their monuments and epitaphs: here if anywhere we should expect to find expressed the hopes or fears of the survivors. In the case of Greece and Rome alike we must confess at once that such expectations are largely disappointed. In Greece we are all familiar with that wonderful series of stele-reliefs found for the most part in the necropolis of the Cerameicus. There we find portrayed the activities and interests of the deceased in life, the knight on his favourite horse, the lady counting her jewels: there too are again and again pathetic scenes of farewell in which the dignified gravity of the departing friend contrasts with the grief of those he leaves behind. But there is little expression of hope of survival either in the tomb or in the unseen land below, and inscriptions when we find them are apt not to contain much beyond the statement of the name and sometimes the deeds of the departed. Even in Rome, where the thought of the presence of the dead played a real part in the life of the family, it is but rarely expressed on the tombstone: there is only the same recital of acts and honours in life—usually set out with a good deal of Roman pomp—and often, in the humbler examples especially, evidence of deep affection and regret. It is indeed mainly in the poetic epitaphs of the *Anthology* and in those rougher Roman verse-inscriptions collected in the *Carmina Epigraphica* that we find an indication of the belief of the survivors as to the fate of their beloved. I do not pretend to a comprehensive acquaintance with these remains, but I think I have noticed enough to be able to judge fairly of their import. In the *Anthology* we find sometimes, especially in the famous epitaphs on the dead in the great battles, a suggestion of an immortality of fame; more often a tacit negation of any belief in survival, though rarely so definitely



expressed as in the bitter lines of Callimachus<sup>1</sup>: "Does Charidas in truth sleep beneath thee? If thou meanest the son of Arimmas of Cyrene, beneath me. O Charidas, what of the underworld? Great darkness. And what of the resurrection? A lie. And Pluto? A fable; we perish utterly." Very frequently the conceptions of the tomb-spirit and the shade in Hades are mingled in a vague confusion, but we do seem to be able to trace the two ideas and the goal to which they lead. Rarely there is a genuine expression of the old chthonic notion of the presence of the dead spirit in the tomb, and the possibility of his aid to the living, as in the beautiful epitaph<sup>2</sup> written by Leonidas of Tarentum for an Old Shepherd: "Let sheep bleat by me, and on an unhewn stone the shepherd pipe softly to them as they feed, and in early spring let the countryman pluck the meadow flower to enwreath my tomb with a garland, and let one make milk drip from a fruitful ewe, holding up her milking-udder, to wet the base of my tomb: there are returns for favours to dead men, there are, even among the departed." But this is an exception, and more generally the chthonic notion leads to an idea of extinction, or at most of sleep; take Callimachus' epitaph<sup>3</sup> on a young girl as typical of many: "The daughters of the Samians oft seek in vain for Crethis, the teller of tales, who knew pretty games, sweetest of workfellows, ever talking; but she sleeps here the sleep to which they all must come." Roman examples lead to the same conclusion: there is little thought of the continued presence of the dead in the old home, only of the annihilation of slumber: "Whoso thou art who knewest Alexandria, read, I pray, these few words, and grieving for awhile go thy way. Or else grieve not at all. There is no ill where there is nothing: when once thou liest down to sleep, thy toil is ended<sup>4</sup>." The chthonic notion seems then to lead in the end to the idea of extinction, or at its best of eternal sleep and rest.

It is perhaps natural that epitaphs being closely associated

<sup>1</sup> J. W. Mackail, *Selections from the Greek Anthology*, Epitaphs, LXII. I quote his translations.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Death, IX.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Epitaphs, XLII.

<sup>4</sup> *Carmina Epigraphica*, ed. Bachrens, vol. I. 214.

with the tomb should most often reproduce the chthonic view. But occasionally we find in them too the reflection of the idea of the other world, and with it comes a softening of tone and a ray of hope. Take two other Greek epitaphs on dead children, both by unknown authors: "Not yet were thy tresses cut, nor had the monthly courses of the moon driven a three years' space, O poor Cleudicus, when thy mother, Nicasis, clasping thy coffin, wailed long over thy lamented grave, and thy father Pericleitus; but by unknown Acheron thou shalt flower out the youth that never, never returns<sup>1</sup>." More explicit and more hopeful is the same thought in the other example: "Hades inexorable and inflexible, why hast thou thus reft infant Callaeschrus of life? Surely the child will be a plaything in the palace of Persephone, but at home he has left bitter sorrows<sup>2</sup>." Most full of hope of any is a late epitaph, strangely compounded of the two ideas, but dominated in spite of its expression by the ideas of the other world, on a husband and wife. "Heliodorus went first, and Diogeneia the wife, not an hour's space after, followed her dear husband; and both, as they dwelt together, are buried under this slab, rejoicing in their common tomb even as in a bride-chamber<sup>3</sup>." More explicit are the Roman examples written when the Greek idea had won its hold. "Nebris, in thy tomb thou hast the title which thou alone dost deserve, who wert the true wife of Octavius Memor. I pray that thou mayest enter the Elysian fields, and pay court to the wife of Dis, and pray Dis himself that he grant thee an honoured abode and the place of rest which thou hast won<sup>4</sup>." More striking still as showing a contempt of the earthly life which is left behind is the following: "The laws of nature and the issue of fate prove vows and weeping and prayers to the gods unavailing. Thou didst spurn father and mother, poor boy, to dwell in the plains of Elysium and the fields of the blessed." In truth the idea of the other world seems to lead on to a larger and larger hope<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Mackail, *op. cit.*, Death, xxxiv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xxxvi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* xlvi.

<sup>4</sup> *C. E.* i. 393.

<sup>5</sup> It might perhaps be argued that the generally pessimistic tone of the epitaphs is as much the outcome of the reaction of scepticism on the fantastic

Through all the course of ancient thought run these two strains of belief with regard to the survival of the dead, the one chthonic and animistic, centring in the tomb, the other anthropomorphic and associated with the Olympian religion, focussed on a vision of a future world. Are we to judge between them, and if so, how can we do it? The ultimate test of religious beliefs must of course be truth; but "here we see through a glass darkly," and no man can claim to pronounce with finality on this or that doctrine. For each his decision rests on his general religious conviction or its negation. To some, as of old, the conception of extinction at death can be received with acquiescence, even with welcome; to others the thought of an eternal sleep, with perhaps a faint glimmer of consciousness, seems to bring comfort; to others, again, the thought of this life is intolerable, if it is not to be followed by a future, whether of continued activity or of punishment, purgatory, and reward. To these the promises of religion can alone supply the motive of action in the present. But there are, I think, subordinate tests which we may apply, especially when we wish to pass judgment on the thoughts and beliefs of past ages. And the first of these is vitality and fruitfulness. A belief which itself withers and leaves little or nothing behind it may in the judgment of historical criticism be regarded as inferior to one which is capable of constant development and advance with the progress of thought in general. Judging by this standard we have seen enough of the possibilities of the two views to reach a conclusion; we can admit the fruitfulness of the chthonic view in the Roman household religion, and lament that with the decay of family life it too was destined to pass away. But we see the vision of the future world growing and increasing, keeping pace with moral development and philosophic thought, and ready to receive new content from religions which took the place of ancient polytheism. And precision of the visions of the other world as of the weakening of the chthonic conception. Historically, this is very possibly the case—more perhaps among the educated classes than the common people—but logically it is, I think, clear that the chthonic notion has no issue save in the idea of sleep or extinction, whereas the vision of the underworld is capable of extension and modification in accordance with the development of general religious and moral conceptions.



the second test is morality: by their fruits may the religions of men be known. The chthonic view had little in it that made for morality: with the conception of another world the idea of morality was bound up almost from the beginning. It is true that Lucretius regarded the vision of Hades as the root of all evil, for it inspired men with the terror of death, from which sprang all the evil passions and crimes of life; but then he made the mistake, characteristic of the Epicurean, and perhaps also of the Roman, of fixing his eyes upon Tartarus and shutting out the possibility of Elysium: to him the future life was all threat and no promise. In its nobler form, which told not so much of punishments and rewards as of the inevitable continuance of earthly characteristics and their natural outcome, the belief in the future life was even in the ancient world a true incentive to moral action upon earth.

In the ears of the most recent school of English writers on ancient religion it is well-nigh blasphemy to speak lightly of things chthonic, and we have lately had the strange spectacle of a Professor of Greek apologizing almost with a sense of guilt for daring to say a good word for the deities of Olympus. In spite of such high authorities I have ventured to maintain and, I hope, to some extent to show that at least in this one department of religious belief the anthropomorphic view is the more fruitful and the nobler. It was indeed, in my judgment, an integral part in that grave yet happy spirit which characterized the ancient religions of Greece and Rome at their best, and its main ideas survived when Olympianism itself had perished.







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